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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 006119

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SUBJECT: ANTI-NORMALIZATION CAMPAIGN IN JORDAN HAS LASTING IMPACT

Classified By: Ambassador Edward W. Gnehm for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d)

Summary

1. (C) The effects of an Anti-Normalization Committee, disbanded over two years ago, linger. One remnant of its campaigns to discredit Jordanians who supported relations with Israel is the ongoing legal case filed by one of its targets, Jordanian businessman and self-proclaimed peace advocate Tariq al-Hammedi. Al-Hammedi's lawsuit against the former head of the Committee and Islamic Action Front (IAF) member Ali Abu al-Sukkar charges that the anti-normalizers' smear campaign in 2001--which branded al-Hammedi an Israeli "collaborator"--bankrupted him and his reputation. The latest hurdle facing the case resulted from Abu al-Sukkar's election to Parliament in June and resulting constitutional protection from legal prosecution. The judge in the case has since requested the Justice Ministry to lift this immunity, but the case remains in limbo: the Justice Minister says he forwarded a request to consider the matter to Parliament, but the Speaker claims no such request has been received. Al-Hammedi has appealed for U.S. support. This case is an example of the continuing presence of anti-normalizers in Jordan, and of the difficulties ordinary Jordanians have endured for openly supporting Jordan's unpopular peace treaty with Israel. End Summary.

Despite Crackdown, Anti-Normalizers' Legacy Lingers

2. (SBU) The Jordanian Professionals Union formed the Anti-Normalization Committee in 1995 in an effort to consolidate anti-Israel sentiment and pressure the Jordanian government to retract its 1994 peace treaty with Israel. Ali Abu al-Sukkar, a member of the IAF, the political arm of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood, headed the committee. The group gathered steam after the second Palestinian intifadah erupted in September 2000, capitalizing on growing anti-Israeli sentiment among many segments of Jordanian society. In early 2001, the committee began publishing lists naming suspected Jordanian "normalizers" i.e. collaborators with Israel, including individuals, companies, and even some schools. The lists, which appeared in the Jordanian press and regularly in mosques and public gathering areas, were the main tool the committee used to pressure the Jordanian public to boycott listed people and companies. In addition, several individuals named in the lists told us at the time that they began to receive anonymous threats after their names appeared. After the Committee published several such lists--including one naming two secondary schools to which elite Jordanians send their children--the government declared the Committee illegal and arrested its members, including Abu al-Sukkar.

3. (C) One target of the campaign, Jordanian businessman and self-proclaimed peace advocate, Tariq al-Hammedi, appeared on several of the lists. More than two years later, he says he continues to suffer the effects of the Committee's smear campaign. Al-Hammedi told us all his pro-peace achievements have been squandered as a result of the anti-normalizers campaign against him. Al-Hammedi boasts a resume of peace-oriented activities, including an unsuccessful bid in 1997 for Parliament on a peace platform, and helping to organize peace-promoting camps for Jordanian, Palestinian, and Israeli youth. As a gesture of support for the 1994 peace agreement, he renamed his restaurant the Palace of Peace. In September 2000, just before the outbreak of the intifadah, he launched a newsletter called Sawt As-Salam (Voice of Peace).

4. (C) He says he has suffered severe financial losses and has been personally threatened for his pro-peace stance. He blames the Committee's actions for bankrupting his restaurant business. He said once his name began appearing on the lists, his customers dwindled. It also forced him to publish his newsletter in Ramallah, because no Jordanian publisher would grant him access to their printing presses. With the exception of the Safeway food store chain, no retailer would sell his newsletter, and he ended that venture as well. He claims he received telephone threats and was personally accosted after his name appeared on the Committee's lists.

Legal Case Faces Continual Obstacles

15. (C) Determined to fight back, al-Hammedi brought a libel lawsuit against Abu al-Sukkar in 2001, which drags on today. Meanwhile, Abu al-Sukkar was elected in June 2003 to Jordan's Lower House of Parliament, and thereby granted immunity from legal prosecution. Initially, Abu al-Sukkar complied with the court's orders, appearing before the court to answer al-Hammedi's charges just before Parliament's regular session opened this summer. However, on the advice of his attorneys, Abu al-Sukkar has refused a second summons citing immunity from legal prosecution, according to a press report on September 3. The judge in al-Hammedi's case has since appealed to the Justice Minister to request that Parliament consider lifting Abu al-Sukkar's immunity so that he can appear before his court. According to the law, however, Abu al-Sukkar's immunity from prosecution can be lifted only if two-thirds of MPs vote in favor. The Justice Minister said he forwarded the request to Parliament, while the speaker says no such request has been received. The case remains in limbo. Regardless of their views on the case at hand, in an vote MPs will be strongly influenced by their personal interests in protecting the principle of their immunity.

16. (C) Al-Hammedi says that after a hearing in July 2001, the Jordanian Bar Association--a member of the Professional Unions--disbarred his Jordanian lawyer after branding him a "normalizer" for taking al-Hammedi's case. The Bar also threatened disciplinary action against any other lawyers who would take al-Hammedi's case, according to al-Hammedi. Abu al-Sukkar, on the other hand, is represented by the chief of the Bar Association. Al-Hammedi says he attempted to contact the American Bar Association seeking legal help, to no avail.

Desperation Drives al-Hammedi to U.S. Embassy's Door

17. (C) Despite press coverage of the lawsuit, al-Hammedi has not gained local support. When he contacted the newly-established Jordanian Human Rights Center for assistance, they advised him to pursue his case in court. His written appeals to the highest levels of the Jordanian government, including King Abdallah, Queen Rania, and Queen Noor, have gone unanswered. He complained that when the GOJ disbanded the Anti-Normalization Committee in 2001, it should have assisted the victims of the campaign, since he had suffered financial and personal losses as a result of his strong and vocal support of his government's peace stance.

18. (C) Al-Hammedi says his lack of options and feeling of helplessness have brought him to the U.S. Embassy for help. In several meetings with Emboffs since August 25, al-Hammedi claims that he does not seek financial compensation for his situation, only moral support from the United States. He notes that the United States backs peace activists in Israel and Palestine, but feels that the plight of those in Jordan has not received similar attention. He clearly hoped we would ensure the GOJ is aware of his case.

Comment

19. (C) Given the negative atmosphere in the region and Parliament about the status of Israeli-Palestinian situation, as well as personal motivations of MPs to preserve maximum protection for their immunities, a two-thirds vote in Parliament to lift Abu al-Sukkar's immunity is improbable, and the house's leadership is unlikely to test the matter and risk a visible symbolic blow to the government's policy on normal relations with Israel.
GNEHM